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Killer's Masquerade

By ROBERT SIECKLEY

AT FIRST, Walter Jallin thought it was the wind that had wakened him. He lay in bed, staring toward the window. He could hear the blind flapping against the frame.

Twisting his neck slightly, Jallin could see the luminous dial of the alarm clock beside the bed. It read three twenty. He grunted and rolled over. Too soon he would have to get up and start the morning chores, he thought hazily.

Then he heard the noise again.

Wide awake now, he sat upright in bed, a sturdy, heavy-shouldered man. The faint sound was unmistakable; someone was walking around downstairs. Jallin rolled noiselessly out of bed.

He got into his pants and tightened the belt firmly around his wide stomach, listening all the time. He was alone in the farmhouse. His wife had stayed behind to oversee the moving of the living-room furniture—antiques which she had inherited from her family and which she had protected fiercely, awaiting the day when she and Jallin would have a farm of their own.

As he padded silently across the floor, Jallin considered possibilities. Certainly his new neighbors would not be calling at this hour—not even as a joke. Only a thief would be sneaking into a lonely farmhouse two miles from the main road.

Jallin took the single-barreled shotgun from the corner where he had left it. Groping his way to the bureau, he found the paper cartridges in a top drawer. He slipped one into the shotgun, put it on half cock, and released the safety. Then he started for the stairs.

His bare feet made no sound; he moved downstairs slowly, like a great cat. About halfway down he stopped and listened again. The noise was very faint now; by straining he could just barely catch a scuffling sound. The thief must be wondering where everything is, Jallin thought, and smiled in the darkness. There was nothing in the living room to steal—or, for that matter, to hide behind.

The staircase faced the front door, and the living room was at right angles to it. Jallin stopped on the last step. He shifted the gun into a firing position. His plan was to turn on the switch at the bot-

tom of the stairs, step into the living room, and fire. It seemed the best way to handle a thief.

Setting the shotgun at full cock, he flipped the hall switch and stepped into the living room.

He didn't shoot, because he didn't know which man to shoot first.

The two men were at opposite corners of the living room. Both had revolvers, both had turned and faced him when he had stepped through the doorway. Jallin's shotgun wavered between the two. The strangers glanced at Jallin, then faced each other again. Their revolvers were poised.

"Drop it," the man nearest the door said. He wore a brown gabardine suit. His eyes never wavered from the man at the other end of the room.

"What the hell is this?" Jallin asked, his shotgun gripped firmly.

"Drop yours," the man beside the window said.

"Who are you?" Jallin asked both of them.

"Don't you read the papers, mister?" the man in the brown suit said. "That guy is Richard Burns. I'm from the county sheriff's office."

Jallin blinked. He remembered reading something in the evening paper about a man named Burns who was wanted by the police. It was something about a bank robbery and a couple of murders. He started to swing his shotgun around, when the man by the window spoke sharply:

"Don't be a fool! Don't you recognize that man's face? You should. It's plastered over every newspaper in the country. He's Richard Burns."

Jallin hesitated. He stared anxiously, first at the one, then the other. Neither man was looking at him. Their bodies were tense, their gun hands rigid. One would open fire if the other blinked.

"Now hold everything," Jallin said nervously, looking back and forth at the two men. Which was Burns? He had seen the newspapers, had even been vaguely aware of a picture on the front page. But to save his life he couldn't remember what the picture looked like. And there was only one cartridge in his shotgun.

Suddenly, Jallin knew *he* was the reason they were waiting! They knew he would shoot the man who shot first. He looked the men over again.

Both were tall. The man by the door was almost handsome; his hair was blond and slightly curly. His brown suit looked new. The man by the window, wearing a blue suit, had wide shoulders. His features were strong and rugged. He had dark brown hair, parted on one side. Neither man looked especially like a cop, or like a killer.

"I've warned you," the man in the blue suit said through tight lips. "That man is a cold-blooded killer. You'd better—"

"Better what, *Burns*?" the man in brown answered.

"Just a minute," Jallin said hoarsely. He had never felt so helpless. He knew that the end of the deadlock depended on him—and if he guessed wrong he'd never have a chance to guess again.

"Listen," the rough-featured man in the blue suit said. "If you want proof, I've got my badge pinned inside my coat. Take a look."

Jallin started to walk forward, but the other man barked, "Stop!" Jallin stopped. "Are you an idiot? When you get in front of him, he'll be able to shoot us both. The only thing he's got pinned inside his coat is a shoulder holster."

There wasn't much time left. The tension was so great they wouldn't hold their fire much longer. "How'd you get here?" Jallin asked, sparring for time.

"We drove up," the man in the blue suit said. "All routes out of the city were covered, and—"

"And," the man in brown continued, "I was covering the one he took. I chased him. He saw I was overtaking him and he turned—"

"—into the road that leads to your farm," the man in blue said. "It was a dead end. I followed him inside, into this room."

"He should have gotten me when I came in after him," the man in brown by the door said. "But he was looking for something to hide behind."

Jallin tried to watch both of them. It couldn't go on like this. Someone had to make a move—and he still didn't know which one to shoot at.

"You should have waited a minute more," the man in brown said to Jallin. "No problem then; someone would have already gotten it."

"That's right," the man by the window said.

At that moment Jallin felt a change in the attitudes of the two men. Time had run out. They were going to shoot. *Which man should he—*

Without any change of expression, almost without a motion, Jallin fired. At the same time, two revolver shots cracked.

Shivering uncontrollably, Jallin opened his eyes and realized that he hadn't been hit. The man in blue had been slammed over backward by the force of the shotgun's charge. He lay completely still.

THE man in the brown suit put his revolver in his pocket and started to unbutton his coat with his left hand. There was a smear of blood high on his right shoulder. Inside the coat Jallin could see the gleam of a badge.

"Nice guesswork," the detective said.

"No guesswork," Jallin muttered, laying the shotgun carefully on the floor. "I figured it out."

"How?" the detective asked.

"I figured," Jallin began slowly, "he must have been Burns. He was at the far end of the room, so he must have come in first."

"Nice work," the detective said in an odd voice. "But just for the record I want to tell you that your reasoning was wrong."

Jallin stared at him.

"Strange as it may sound, we city boys don't expect to find front doors unlocked. Burns went in through the window. I came in after him. He could have got me then, if he hadn't been looking for something to duck behind. Anyhow, we circled the room. I didn't want to fire first—if I missed, the flash would have given me away. Burns figured it the same way. When you turned on the lights, we had made a half circuit, looking for something to hide behind." The detective smiled wearily.

"The light stopped us, of course. But what I'm saying is, if you'd turned on that light a few seconds earlier—or later—I would have been back by the window, where I was at first."

Jallin sucked in his breath. "Well," he said. "I sure had to shoot someone." ▲▲▲



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